

The Creation of a Scout/Sniper Battalion within the Marine
Division

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*"The Scout Sniper Capability is being degraded across its full spectrum of capabilities as a result of a training deficiency of both operators and commanders. Further analysis identified the root causes spanning the DOTMLPF spectrum. The most significant finding was that no Scout Sniper Platoon has yet been identified to have deployed to either OIF or OEF with a full T/O of school trained MOS 0317s. Further, as a result of the current high operational tempo, units are unable to send selected Marines to the Basic and Advanced Scout Sniper Courses. Adding to this problem is a high attrition rate at the Basic Sniper Course, due in part to a failure of units to properly screen, select, and prepare Marines for the rigorous course. Analysis indicated that a lack of standardized unit proficiency training has contributed significantly to this problem."*¹

Currently a Scout/Sniper platoon in the Marine Corps ground combat element is located either with headquarters and service company or weapons company of an infantry battalion. The Marines that comprise the platoon are volunteers from within

¹United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper, Initial Capabilities Document (ICD), MROC Decision Memorandum, 39-2008

that battalion who are screened and trained to fill that essential mission. However, many shortfalls in the capabilities of this community have led battalion commanders to lose trust in their sniper platoons and, as a result they are not being employed to their proper potential.² By removing the sniper platoon from the infantry battalion structure and creating a scout sniper battalion within the Marine Division, sniper platoons will be more lethal and better able to support infantry battalion commanders.

Time required to create an 0317 (scout sniper)

The reason for this capability shortfall has been largely due to the deployment tempo which makes each successive platoon staffed with fewer and fewer school trained snipers. As a result, skill levels are not where they need to be in order to provide the full spectrum of mission tasks that the Battalion Commander requires. Upon the return of an infantry battalion from a deployment to OIF or OEF, a scout sniper platoon undergoes a large turnover of personnel. In the few short months that the platoon is back in garrison, its members are required to screen, train, and send to school the volunteers from within the battalion who desire to serve as snipers. In

²United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper, Initial Capabilities Document (ICD), MROC Decision Memorandum, 39-2008

this same short period of time, often the platoon commander, platoon sergeant, chief scout, and team leaders will all depart as well. This is because the platoon commander, who is an 0203 ground intelligence officer, heads off to an intelligence billet, while the platoon sergeant, chief scout and team leaders will usually "be up for" PCS or EAS. The result of this situation is that each time that the infantry battalion deploys, its snipers have fewer and fewer school trained 0317s, thus, decreasing the platoon's effectiveness on the battlefield. "As operations continue to demand skilled Scout Snipers, units have been piecing together scout sniper platoons that are, in reality, the equivalent of well trained line infantry squads, as most billets are being filled with untrained scout snipers. According to Marine Corps manpower estimates, on average, the Marine Corps is currently operating 20% under the required MOS 0317 staffing."³ The result of the platoon's lack of proficient snipers is that they often are no more than infantry platoons with scoped rifles. However, the infantry battalion commander needs them to be much more capable.

³United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper, Initial Capabilities Document (ICD), MROC Decision Memorandum, 39-2008

By the creation of a sniper battalion, the structure that would be in place would mitigate some of these problems. A sniper battalion structure would be similar to a combat engineer battalion. Each company would generally support a regiment within the division. This would allow for a T/O platoon to be ready to "chop" to their battalion prior to the deployment as the engineer platoon does. The battalion structure that would remain in garrison would be focused on the training the scout sniper platoons that have the full spectrum of skills that are required to support the infantry battalion. The problems of diminishing capabilities would cease to be a concern for the supported unit.

Primary MOS and billets beyond Sergeant

Second, lessons learned from experienced snipers are often being lost due to the lack of retention and billets (0317 scout sniper) above the rank of sergeant. The valuable experience that the senior members of a sniper platoon have learned is often lost when these Marines return from deployment. The reason for the low retention among the 0317's is linked to the few opportunities for them to remain in the Marine Corps as snipers. Except for the handful of billets at the sniper schools, no billets exist beyond the rank of sergeant. Since the platoon sergeant billet is not required to be an 0317, the chance of

returning to a battalion as a platoon sergeant for a sniper platoon after a "b" billet is unlikely.

By having a sniper battalion, along with making 0317 a primary MOS, the structure would be in place for Marines to serve potentially in billets up to senior staff NCO. Each sniper company would have gunnery sergeants and the H&S company as well as the sniper support company (where the pool of new Marines would learn the basic skills before going to school) would have master sergeants (S-3 shop and support company would have a cadre of 0317s at a sniper training area).

For all of the time and money that the Marine Corps spends on training these Marines, it would get a much better return on its investment. The experience gained by years of operating would remain within the Marine Corps. Also, a school trained 0317 would likely deploy more than the current average of one or two deployments before he is finished with sniping for the remainder of his career.

Platoon leadership and training support

Finally, sniper platoon commanders struggle with trying to train a platoon in a vacuum as he is the only sniper platoon in the battalion and usually falls under the S-2 in H&S Co. This lieutenant is often required to fend for himself to learn how to

facilitate training through the myriad of requirements in order to even lock on his training. The scout sniper platoon is commanded by a lieutenant (0203) ground intelligence officer. The career track for these Marines only includes about a year and a half (usually one deployment cycle) before he will serve in an intelligence billet somewhere else in the division. From the time that this lieutenant checks into the battalion, he is responsible for building a sniper platoon and at the same time he is challenged with all of the other issues (screening, training, and preparing a new Marine for sniper school). The platoon commander is tries to accomplish this while serving in a battalion where there is rarely another officer who can assist or advise him on sniper training. The exception is the S-2 who may have commanded a sniper platoon. Therefore, it is very difficult for the platoon to ever train to the proper skill sets that are required to execute sniper missions. This is a very challenging environment for a lieutenant who has had only about two weeks of instruction on sniper employment.

In contrast, the sniper battalion would provide the structure for that young officer to have a company commander advise him as well as a company XO and S-3 shop to help facilitate the training of that sniper platoon. In addition, along with the creation of a sniper battalion, sniper training

areas need to be set up (similar to the engineer training areas), in which the skill sets could be mastered and maintained.

Counter argument

The counter arguments regarding this topic are as follows:

1. Some of the infantry community would argue that the sniper platoon should be left where it is since the current structure has worked. From the authors' perspective, this, infact, is largely a control issue. If pressed, infantry commanders themselves will admit that the sniper platoons are lacking the skills that they need, thus requiring action to be taken to fix the problem.
2. Others will oppose the proposal because they believe that relocating the sniper platoon will make them even more elitist and that they will be unwilling to provide the support that the infantry battalion requires due to the elitist mentality that is often present in sniper platoons. The attitude of "I don't have to support you" would make the relationships between the supported unit and the supporting unit less seamless. This is largely a leadership issue, easily remedied by a good leader who can remove the pretenses they have about how they are employed.

3. Finally, some in the infantry battalion will oppose forming the sniper battalion because fear that they will lose some of their best Marines. By having the platoon reside within the infantry battalion, commanders are more likely to let their Marines try out for snipers since they will see a return by letting some of their best Marines go. They believe that a sniper platoon is in essence, a rifle platoon with special skill sets. However, it is the very fact that they do require special training that they are best supported in garrison by a separate organization. After all, an engineer platoon that is attached to an infantry battalion would not benefit from a permanent relationship since they need their own structure for their training.

Conclusion

By removing the sniper platoons from the infantry battalions, many of the identified problems will be mitigated. By having a structure in place that can focus primarily on the facilitation of training, sniper platoons will be more lethal and better skilled to support the infantry battalion commander. That supported commander can count on getting a T/O platoon with its full skill set when the time comes to deploy. By creating billets beyond the rank of sergeant and making 0317 a primary MOS, the most experienced snipers can continue to serve the

Marine Corps to lead, train and mentor future snipers. The sniper community will no longer watch so many of its experienced snipers walk out the door after one or two deployments. Finally, the Marine Corps will set up that young officer for success by giving him the proper support to lead and train his platoon. This valuable asset will finally get the structure that it desperately needs in order to prepare the future snipers properly for their essential mission.

Presently, the Marine Corps Scout Sniper Capability has been assessed as a critical resource for commanders, but was evaluated to be performing at a sub-standard level in multiple mission critical areas. This has been a result of numerous factors, but primarily traced to an archaic Cold War doctrine and organization. Failure to address these problems will lead to the Scout Sniper Capability becoming less effective while threat nations' capabilities become more adept and lethal. Unchecked, this critical threat capability will lead to enemy dominance of precision fire engagements on the battlefield as well as an increase in the

*costs and risks to U.S. and coalition forces conducting the full range of military operations.*⁴

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⁴United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper, Initial Capabilities Document (ICD), MROC Decision Memorandum, 39-2008

End notes

1-4 United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper, Initial Capabilities Document (ICD), MROC Decision Memorandum, 39-2008

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